

The most fantastic vacation ever!

In February 2008, three ladies from Virginia decided to brave the summer weather in Australia and had what they have called an "Adventure of a Lifetime". One of these ladies, the only American pilot on the tour, has blessed us with a written version of the trip. Parts of it will have you laughing out loud. Other sections will have you shaking your head, (poor Phoebe losing her passport in the Sydney cab), but it's easy to see what a great time they had. If you're interested in reading about their two weeks in the 100+F temperatures, keep reading.

Thanks again, Susan, for sharing your vacation with us.

FYI - Susan says she is looking forward to her next trip and is going as soon as she can find a passenger.

###

The most fantastic vacation ever!

Four women in two Cessna 172s flying 2500 nm (31 hours) in beautiful Australia- a country of vast contrasts from ultra modern cities of Adelaide, Brisbane and Sidney to the outback and bush and the awesome-barren emptiness. Such fabulous people. The flying challenging at times but the only way to go. An adventure of a lifetime!

We were met after our commercial flight from LAX at the Quanta's Terminal in Brisbane by Sarah, the 25 year old Australian pilot that joined our adventure, briefed us on VFR corridors that even the Australians manage to screw up, interpreted the Australians rapid fire language ("we are divided by one common language" became our chant). Sarah taught us that the only beverage in Australia is Cooper's Pale Ale. Sarah was fantastic fun, tough as they come and very knowledgeable about flying the Australian Southeast. She was also a glider pilot which immediately endeared her to me - she flew gliders at Waikerie!

Renting the two aircraft in Brisbane was interesting! The chief flight instructor had no idea he was to rent out one of his aircraft to an American (and a woman, at that). Finally after a morning and half an afternoon, the decision was made to give me a check ride on my way from Archer Field in Brisbane to Gold Coast. The written was grueling as I had less than 1/2 hour to complete it before weather was to move in, I had no idea how to convert meters to feet, liters to gallons-fortunately altitudes are in feet and miles in nautical. The other fortunate part was that the instructor giving me the check ride did not have time to grade the test before turning the keys over to me. The check ride consisted mainly of navigation and an emergency or two. I actually flew through a rainbow-never have done that before and it had to be good luck as after landing with a 25 kt wind (couldn't see the airport until 2 mile final because of rain), the instructor stamped my log book and departed in another aircraft with a student. We were free to begin our journey of a life time in VH-Juliet Gulf Romeo-I grew to love this sturdy 1976 Cessna 172 with 53 gallons fuel!!! Sarah and Phoebe flew VH Bravo Victor Yankee, a fuel injected Cessna 172 and light weight Suzanne was with me for the 2570nm trip.

As more rain, wind and night were rapidly approaching we got our first of many taxi cabs .Yes, and on our second day in Australia, we discovered that ALL the toilets are weird and flush funny and the water goes the wrong way.

In the morning after walking the beach to see the sun come up over the Pacific, I discovered the sun actually doesn't come up exactly in the east because it grew light BEHIND me. (11 degrees east variation was to confuse this Virginian several times). After a delightful breakfast of iced coffee and Coolangata pastries we walked the beach to the international surfing contest-the waves were so huge, I could not believe people actually

ran toward them. In several hours we were flying over the same unbelievably gorgeous beaches. On our flight to Coff's Harbor having to deviate inland for military airspace, I realized that the KLN 89 GPS was not as reliable as I hoped (probably pilot error-garbage in, garbage out). We ended up following an active railroad track and I felt very much like I was back in the US except for the gorgeous mountains, the miles of tropical trees and farms.

My first real encounter with air traffic control was coming into Coff's Harbor. The airport looked deserted except for one lone airliner. Tower told me to land on the grass strip-sort of surprised as there was no wind, no traffic, I asked how long the grass strip was. He told me in meters, I asked how long in feet. He said , “I'll make it easy for you, just land on the paved strip”. The Australians all seem to love Americans, the controllers just aren't sure we can fly aircraft. Taxi cab to “Opal Cove” another gorgeous resort on the beach with a lagoon that I am sure had crocodiles-didn't see any and never did except in a zoo near Adelaide. There were several things we were all going to lie about seeing but as we can't keep our stories straight, the fact is that we never saw the Blue Mountains as we had to get on top going inland and coming home 13 days later again had to come in over an overcast.

Dinner of Kangaroo- not bad, some Cooper's Pale Ale and lots of laughs and the next morning while flirting with the cab driver, Phoebe lost her passport. Australians are honest genuinely nice people and this man whose name we never even knew, somehow tracked us down by phone in Sidney to tell us he had found the passport and would forward it to our hotel in Brisbane- “no worries” at this point but poor Phoebe did end up spending an extra two nights in Australia as passport didn't arrive in time for our commercial flight back to US.

Sarah and I worked on our flight to Sidney and the nightmarish VFR corridor -we were actually supposed to find the correct inlet and a light house, after passing over at least ten on our 3.6 hour flight, we turned one inlet to early and ended up flying over at least half the houses of this 4 million population city. Getting a little nervous about the all dreaded military airspace, and not finding the Brooklyn Bridge, I called Sidney approach which I gather is reserved for IFR only. The controller was actually delightful even though I could only get about 1/4 of his kindly staccato instructions. We did learn we were coming up on the Brooklyn Bridge, which I probably would not have recognized as a bridge if I didn't have a good imagination. We dutifully went on our way after one more request to the controller to “Repeat please”. The controller very pleasantly and slowly said “ I said, Ga Day”. Oh they are wonderful people and by the end of the trip, I actually looked forward to conversing with them.

Bankston Airport is one of the busiest general aviation airports in Australia- so glad I was given a straight in to 11L as the taxiing to general aviation from 11C or 11R would be a zoo as “progressivetaxi” doesn't seem to be an option in Australia and in all 12 of the airports in which we landed, I never saw a taxiway sign! How is it that they don't seem to have the runway incursion problem we do in the US???

Sidney is an ultra modern delightful city with beautiful harbors-people actually ride the high speed ferries to work in the morning. While the girls went shopping, I headed via two ferry boats to Rose Bay where I got to take my first DeHavilan Beaver Float Plane flight. Rose Bay, since the flying boats era, has been designated for sea planes. They let me sit right seat behind the Pratt & Whitney, not that they were impressed with my seaplane rating and 13 hours on floats in a PA18. Sidney is gorgeous from any view. We took a sunset dinner cruise that night and saw it all again!

Our shortest flight, 12 miles, was from Bankston toward the Blue Mountains. We had hoped to fly to Waga Waga however ended up at Camden, a glider, tail dragger, small flight school airport with delightful

people. We waited for an opening in the clouds which never came. One of the Australians locals, Mike and his son had lived in Roanoke and flew gliders with Lanier and Tachla Franz at New Castle, Va! They gave us a ride to the only motel with rooms- Australia is a country of festivals-they celebrate everything and instead of news casts at night they have sports casts. The motel looked like a horse stable turned into a motel or a motel made to look like a stable-whatever-it was clean and within walking distance of a restaurant with great food and a lovely garden outback with huge rose trees and every tropical blooming plant imaginable. Sarah and I waited out a rain storm in the bar and had the best time listening to a fantastic two man band with true Australian music that was not country but not anything else I recognized but really liked.

Bright and early the next morning we knew it was going to be a great day when two hot air balloons floated by and a Pitts put on a air show in apparently his practice area-fun. Breakfast from a grocery store and off on a two leg day from Camden to over fly Waga Waga on to Yarranwonga for fuel and downing the rest of our grocery goods before heading over the first big dessert like flat barrenness to the cool coast and Waranbool. It was a 6.2 hours of flying day with strap down thermals at 8500. For 50 miles I practiced saying "Yarranwonga traffic Cessna 172 Juliet Gulf Romeo 10 North inbound for left downwind 19 Yarrawonga"- I still screwed it up but we were so far from any other airport, they had to know I was coming into the airport south of the huge lake. By that time the GPS was working, although I never really trusted that it would-pilotage, pilotage, pilotage! Suzanne was great at finding many of the check points -rivers and lakes that had dried up, railroad beds of defunct train service, power lines that blended with the moon type surface, towns consisting of 4 or 5 buildings, main roads of dirt. I would never do this area of the world alone as Flight Following and 1-800 WX Brief do not exist. No one would look for you -maybe ever! Even after learning much of the phraseology, the airspace and rules, it was comforting to know that Sarah would miss us if we did not arrive at sunset.

Yarrawonga was my favorite airport of the trip. Ann and Peter ran the pilot shop from a hangar with aircraft paraphernalia hanging from the rafters and Trike Ultralights for rent. Peter is an instructor and used to fly big aircraft. Such nice people-I want to go back!

Waranbool was one of my favorite towns. The taxi cab driver could only understand our Australian Sarah- wonder how many times we would have been stranded without her? The light show of the ship wrecks would give Disney a run for their money and dinner at Pippies would put some of our finest restaurants to shame. By the way- no tipping in Australia, the wait staff is apparently well paid and enjoy their jobs and their customers.

Taking off on the grass strip next morning was smoother than some paved I have been on. This is the day to tell our second lie-we never saw the 12 Apostles in Warnabool-head winds so strong that even with 53 gal of fuel we were a bit nervous about getting to an airport with fuel. Airports, except in the larger cities, are completely secure, not a soul about and card lock fuel with hoses that are so heavy it takes two women -one to hold the hose while the other up on a spindly ladder fuels. Our third lie: we also never saw a whales tale although we flew for 4.6 hours along the beach from Warnabool to Adelaide -apparently the temperatures were so hot the whales went south 30 miles to cooler waters. It was one of the prettiest flights although we searched all altitudes from 500 ft to 8,500 for less of a head wind.

Getting through and around military airspace and finding the VFR corridors were the challenge of the long day- Sarah had briefed me to follow the Mangroves inland once we got to the factories north of the big airport. I never thought to ask her what the heck a Mangrove looked like on the ground much less from the air, but somehow I managed to not violate any airspace or at least they haven't caught up with me yet. I remember hearing

about a German that rented an aircraft in New York and had violated over a hundred FARs and flown through multitudes of airspace restrictions by the time the FAA caught up with him in California -they let him go if he promised never to fly again in the US- I really didn't want to mess things up for future US pilots- it is too wonderful to spoil and besides-too embarrassing.

We spent two interesting days in Adelaide with Bob and Delray Keogh, parents of Australian Air Safaris, giving Sarah a break and us a look at the land from another generation closer to people that developed this country. We drove through back country winding roads to a zoo with every Australian animal and creature-so glad I saw some from a safe distance. We actually saw kangaroos in the wild and the funniest Emu, they look at you while they are running away and run right into things! At Victor Harbor we walked out to the beautiful island on the South Sea and then took a horse drawn tram back to mainland and vehicled to the harbor of Adelaide-again so ultra modern with gorgeous sail and motor boats, wonderful restaurants and kids and dogs picnicking on the grass.

Northeast we flew over the vineyards and wineries we had visited. We followed the Murry river, the longest river in Australia, for over half its length into the bush. We flew within 10 nm of Waikie- the famous glider port of Australia. Now I know why as fairly early morning at 7500 we were getting some strong thermals. It was so desolate in this area that if you saw dust on the road miles away, you couldn't wait to see what was kicking up such a trail and then you would look down and feel they were so lonely, you circled around just to let them know you were there- a bond in the middle on no where.

Swan Hill! The part I remember the most about Swan Hill is that after walking along the Murry River Path, I was so hot I ventured into a RSL-Returned Service League, like our VFWs only open to everyone because it is in a town of 11,000 and there aren't enough RSL people to keep it open. Deciding I wanted to blend in with the locals and NOT be a tourist, I sat down and only said 3 words "Cooper's Pale Ale". The bartender immediately said "what part of the US are you from";-

so much for my attempt to eves drop.I learned it was 41Celsius outside, which inspired quite a discussion from all trying to figure out how much that was in Fahrenheit- had left my trusty E6 B in the aircraft- don't even think about going to Australia with out it. Anyway about 107F is what they came up with and I decided not to continue my walk on the river. That night we had an Italian dinner at Quovitis that was better than anything I had eaten in Italy-the owner came to the table to take our order and actually designed several delightful concoctions from the bar for us. Once Phoebe was talking so much, he asked her if he had permission to leave and go fix our food!

7500 feet to Dubbo with a nice tail wind-3.1 hours. As we taxied in we saw the Royal Flying Doctor King Air outside their hangar. What a read to learn of this fabulous service that has provided health care for the outback stoic people since the 1920s or maybe slightly earlier, now flying Navajos and King Airs. After lunch in downtown Dubbo, population 30 plus thousand we enjoyed a visit at Jedda Boomerang- the highlight of the people part of the trip. These half breed Aborigines were fascinating, telling of their culture and beliefs. They made their living from art work and making boomerangs from Mulga-a wood that is so dense, it will not float in water. I bought and wood burned a decoration on one. Another River walk-much more beautiful and with thoughts of all we had learned from these people who believe everything has a living spirit. As I walked under a huge tree filled with at least 50 white Cockatoos they set up such a racket. I laughed out loud because the aboriginal woman told me that cockatoos were really old aboriginal women that gossiped when ever a woman walked under their tree-wow-how did they know so much to cackle about? The lady at the art

gallery told me the walk to our motel would be about 55 minutes-after one and a half hours, I knew these Australians were not only tough but also fast walkers!

After a delightful Thai dinner at the Rose Garden, we all walked the river path to see the art work painted on the bridge abutments by the aboriginal prisoners as community service projects-beautiful and so unique.

The next day a short cool flight arriving before lunch in the strangest place I have ever been- flying over Lightning Ridge was our first indication that this town was different-large piles of rocks, like big ant hills next to tin boxes that could be houses with old cars sitting beside and holes in the ground. Wow-it turned out this is how a lot of the 3,000 population made their living-going underground by day to mine opals, to the bar at night where we found these people to be interesting and fun to talk with. After the bar they take the roughest roads I have ever been on back to their tin houses. We took a tour of the mines and actually got out in the sweltering heat and scratched around looking for something shiny or that could be polished up. The people we met said mining was an obsession and even told of a man that struck it rich but never left his tin house or claim and continued to live his life going down under the ground every day.

As we had not read the fine print in the ERSA (similar to our Airport Facility Directory) we didn't order fuel a week in advance so had to fly to Moree the next morning. Because it was predicted to be hot and one of our longest flights, we left on our only drawn flight. Ended up with the sun directly in our eyes and believe me, the sun is brighter in Australia.

Flying into Moree I had my most fun conversation with another aircraft. A Caravan aircraft was coming in about the same time and being in no hurry, I told him I would be #2 behind him. As he was exiting the runway, he thanked me and I finally got to say it "NO WORRIES MATE"! Oh such fun.

On top over about 80 miles of overcast and we missed the Blue Mountains again. Coming into Bellana at about 800 feet we saw Bravo Victor Yankee chukka chukka chukking along-it was the third time on the whole trip we saw each other although we did chat on their aircraft to aircraft 123.45. We both had to "ORBIT" prior to clearance to pass at 500 ft on the coast at the end of the Brisbane Int Airport. Glad Sarah had told me that "orbit" meant "circle". Also the pattern is called the circuit and AD means Air Drome.

Then inland at an inlet at Southport field to follow the double lane road to the Bullseye painted on top of the Target Big Box-was really delighted when both Suzanne and I spotted it at the same time. Called Archer Field to proceed inbound for right down wind for 10R at 1500 ft and drop down to 1000 at the opposite end of the runway-how is it they don't have aircraft drop on top of each other? Then "cleared for the roll through"-aha-had already been fooled on that one-it does not mean a touch and go-it means to land long- apparently the Australians like to save tires and stay in the cool air. The controller did fool me one more time -he told the aircraft behind me that I was on "lite final"-being wary there was more of us turning final than just me, I said "JGR is on right base"- only to find out from Sarah's laughter later that "lite final" means "short final". Now we were "home" from a fabulous adventure. I will go back and hope I meet up with VH- JGR and all the delightful people again-especially Sarah and I hope she becomes the helicopter pilot she wants to be and I hope she flies for the Royal Flying Doctor Service.